

TALKING DEATH IN 15-TH CENTURY ENGLAND

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Abstract

The following is an applied research on *Everyman*, an anonymous 15-th century morality play. It exhibits, *in nuce*, an *Et moriemur* attitude with a tiny difference, thus foreshadowing the birth of *la mort de soi* attitude. If this viewpoint is singular and novel (*i.e.* creative) we cannot go as far as to say. We will have to admit it is deeply culture-bound, in other words that it is a faithful reflection of *Zeitgeist*.

Keywords: *Everyman*, *Death*, *Good Deeds*, *et moriemur*, *everyday creativity*.

And we shall all die (Aries 1976). Our ending shows how transitory we are. The story saith that **Man** should look well, and take good heed to the ending, he should never be so gay! He thinks sin in the beginning full sweet, which in the end causeth his soul to weep, when the body lieth in clay, Fellowship and Jollity, Strength, Pleasure and Beauty, having faded from him as flower in May.

Of ghostly sight people are so blind, drowned in sin, they never know God for their God.

In worldly riches is all their mind, they fear not of His rightwiseness, the sharp rod. His law that He showed, when He for them died, they forget clean, and the shedding of His blood red; He hung between two, it cannot be denied; to get them life He suffered to be dead; He healed their feet, with thorns hurt was His head; He could do no more than He did, truly; and now He seeth the people do clean forsake Him. They use the seven deadly sins damnable; as pride, covetise, wrath, and lechery. The worse they be from year to year. Verily they will become much worse than beasts. Like traitors deject, they thank God not for the pleasure that He to them meant, nor yet for their being that He them hath lent; He proffered the people great multitude of mercy, and few there be that asketh it heartily; they be so cumbered with worldly riches, that needs on them He must do justice, on Everyman living without fear.

Whereupon God's commandment **Death** will shortly fulfil. He will presently go to Everyman, and show him, in God's name, a pilgrimage he must on him take, which he in no wise may escape. He will in the world go run overall, and cruelly outsearch both great and small. Every man will He beset that liveth beastly out of God's laws, and dreadeth not folly. He that loveth riches Death will strike with his dart, his sight to blind, and from heaven to depart – except that alms be his good friend – in hell for to dwell, world without end. "Everyman, stand still! Whither art thou going thus gaily? Hast thou thy Maker forget? Though thou have forgotten Him here, He thinketh on thee in the heavenly sphere. God desireth that I shall show thee a reckoning He will needs have without any longer respite. On thee thou must take a long journey; therefore thy book of count with thee thou bring; for turn again thou can not by no way. And look thou be sure of thy reckoning, for before God thou shalt answer, and show thy many bad deeds, and good but a few, how thou hast spent thy life, and in what wise, before the chief Lord of Paradise."

Everyman's DENIAL (or, to be sure, his ISOLATION) is quite feeble, indeed – almost nonexistent: "Full unready I am such reckoning to give. I know thee not. What messenger art thou?" But Death's answer is relentless: "I am Death, that no man dreadeth. For every man I 'rest, and no man spareth; for it is God's commandment that all to me should be obedient." (Everyman 1485)

"No offence meant," as professional killers say in pulp fiction. "No offense taken," seems to be Everyman's answer – in which ANGER is missing altogether. But maybe coming as a surprise in all this both pitiable and dignified response, Everyman is fairly resourceful when it comes to BARGAINING (Kubler-Ross 2009):

first in material terms (“O Death! Thou comest when I had thee least in mind! In thy power it lieth me to save, yet of my good will I give thee, if ye will be kind, yea! a thousand pound shalt thou have, and defer this matter till another day”), then in moral, deeply subjective terms (“Alas! shall I have no longer respite? I may say Death giveth no warning: To think on thee, it maketh my heart sick, for all unready is my book of reckoning. But twelve year and I might have abiding, my counting-book I would make so clear, that my reckoning I should not need to fear. Wherefore, Death, I pray thee, for God’s mercy, spare me till I be provided of remedy”).

The tide abideth no man; and in the world each living creature for Adam’s sin must die of nature. The answer is consequently a straight ‘No’ when it comes to calling again shortly or even the very next day. One appendage is allowed, though: that the soon-to-be departed should have some company from the vale terrestrial, to help him in his journey and ease his sorrow.

Fellowship, most loving and kind, is first in line, he won’t forsake somebody in need. He will certainly listen to and join Everyman, who is commanded to go on a journey, a long way, hard and dangerous, and give a strait count without delay, before the high judge, Adonai. But that will be to his pain and, when should they come again? Never again till the day of doom? In faith, then he won’t go that loath journey – not for the father that begat him! If Everyman eat, and drink, and make good cheer, or haunt to women the lusty company, he would not forsake him while the day is clear. He would be ready to go to mirth, solace, and play. He would even be ready to murder or kill, in that he will help with a good will! But he won’t a foot with Everyman go; from him he will depart as fast as he may.

Kindred and **Cousin** are second in line, the three of them were once sworn to live and die together, in wealth and woe. Everyman is bidden to go on a pilgrimage to his pain, and he knows well he will never come again; he must give a reckoning strait: how he hath lived and his days spent; also of ill deeds, that he hath used in his time, sith life was him lent; and of all virtues that

he hath refused. But both Kindred and Cousin plead ‘No,’ they had better fast bread and water all this five year and more. Cousin hath the cramp in his toe. He even admits he cannot be trusted, ‘cause he will be a deceiver of sorts. But, for compensation, Everyman could have Kindred’s maid with all his heart; she loveth to go to feasts, there to be nice, and to dance, and abroad to start; he will give her leave to help Everyman in that journey, if that he and she may agree. Oh, yes, he will abide behind even when Everyman hath most need.

Goods is third in line. If Everyman ever had feelings for someone, he surely had for Goods and riches who lieth here in corners, trussed and piled so high, and in chest he is locked so fast, also sacked in bags. He cannot stir; in packs low he lieth. And he singth another song, that he, brittle as he is, will follow no man in such voyages, he will follow no man one foot; his love is contrary to the love everlasting. But if Everyman had Gods loved moderately during, so as to the poor to give part of him, then should him not in this dolour be, nor in this great sorrow care. His condition is man’s soul to kill; if he save one, a thousand he doth spill. This is his guise – another to deceive in the same wise.

Saith Everyman: “O, to whom shall I make my moan for to go with me in that heavy journey? First Fellowship said he would go with me; his words were very pleasant and gay, but afterward he left me alone. Then spake I to my kinsmen, all in despair, and also they gave me words fair, they lacked no fair speaking, but all forsook me in the ending. Then went I to my Goods, that I loved best, in hope to have comfort, but there had I least; for my Goods sharply did me tell that he bringeth many into hell. Then of myself I was ashamed, and so I am worthy to be blamed.” (Everyman 1485)

Having nowhere else to go and desperate to find help in his hour of need, Everyman now depends on his **Good Deeds** although he knows only too well she is so weak, that she can neither move nor speak. She lieth, cold in the ground; his sins hath her sore bound, that she cannot stir. He comes to her, his moan to make; he prays her that she will go with him. She would full fain,

but she cannot stand, verily. If Everyman had perfectly cheered her, his book of count full ready had be. But the books of his works and deeds lie under the feet, to his soul's heaviness. She is sorry of his fall, and fain would she help him, if she were able. Though on her feet she may not go, she hath a sister that shall with him also, called Knowledge, which shall with him abide, to help him make that dreadful reckoning.

Knowledge, for a start, will go with Everyman, and be his guide, in his most need to go by his side. Now they go together lovingly to **Confession**, that cleansing river, who dwelleth in the house of salvation; he is in good conceit with God almighty.

Here is what Everyman has to say: "O glorious fountain, that all uncleanness doth clarify, wash from me the spots of vice unclean, that on me no sin may be seen. I come, with Knowledge, for my redemption, repent with hearty and full contrition; for I am commanded a pilgrimage to take, and great accounts before God to make. Now, I pray you, Shrift, mother of salvation. Help my Good Deeds for my piteous exclamation." (Everyman 1485) Confession gives him comfort as well as he can, and a precious jewel he will give him, called **Penance**, wise voider of adversity; therewith shall his body chastised be, with abstinence, and perseverance in God's service. Here shall him receive that scourge of him, which is penance strong that he must endure, to remember his Saviour was scourged for him with sharp scourges, and suffered it patiently; so must him. Knowledge will keep him in this voyage, and by that time Good-Deeds will be with him, but in any wise he should be sure of mercy, for his time draweth fast. And he will saved be, ask God mercy, and He will grant, truly. When with the scourge of penance man doth him bind, the oil of forgiveness then shall he find.

Thanked be God for his gracious work! For now Everyman will his penance begin; this hath rejoiced and lighted his heart, though the knots be painful and hard within. O eternal God, O heavenly figure, O way of rightwiseness, O goodly vision, which descended down in a Virgin pure because He would every man

redeem, which Adam forfeited by his disobedience. O blessed Godhead, elect and high Divine, forgive Everyman's grievous offence: here he crieth God mercy in this presence. O ghostly Treasure, O Ransomer and Redeemer, of all the world Hope and Conductor, Mirror of joy, and Founder of mercy, which enlumineth heaven and earth thereby, hear his clamorous complaint, though it late be: Receive his prayers. Unworthy in this heavy life though he be, a sinner most abominable, yet let his name be written in Moses' table. O Mary, pray to the Maker of all thing, him for to help at his ending; and save him from the power of his enemy, for Death assaileth him strongly. And, Lady, that he may by means of his prayer of God's glory to be partner, by the means of his Passion he it craveth; he beseecheth God to help his soul to save. If only Knowledge gave him the scourge of penance; his flesh therewith shall give acquittance.

Saith Everyman scourging himself: "In the name of the Holy Trinity, my body sore punished shall be. Take this, body, for the sin of the flesh! Also though delightest to go gay and fresh, and in the way of damnation thou did me bring, therefore suffer now strokes of punishing. Now of penance I will wade the water clear, to save me from Purgatory, that sharp fire." (Everyman 1485)

Good-Deeds, thus relieved of his sickness and woe, with Everyman will go, and not spare; his good works she will help him to declare. And consequently Everyman's heart is light, and shall be evermore; now will he smite faster than he did before.

It is all set now. Everyman should no more be sad, but be blessed without end, and ever rejoice; he should only put on the garment of sorrow. **Contrition** it is that getteth forgiveness. They need not fear and they still collect three persons of great might: **Discretion** and **Strength** they hight, and **Beauty** may not abide behind, also **Five Wits** as for counsellors. They all promise by Everyman to stand in distress through the world round, they will not depart for sweet nor sour.

It is high time for Everyman's last will: "I will make my testament here before you all present: in alms half my goods I will give with my hands

twain in the way of charity, with good intent, and the other half still shall remain in queath to be returned there it ought to be. This I do in despite of the fiend of hell, to go quit out of his peril ever after and this day." (Everyman 1485)

The lot of them have only one short voyage to make. Knowledge adviseth Everyman to go to Priesthood and receive of him in any wise the holy sacrament and ointment together. There is no emperor, king, duke, nor baron, that of God hath commission as hath the least priest in the world being; he beareth the keys, and thereof hath the cure for man's redemption – it is ever sure – which God for our soul's medicine gave us out of his heart with great pine. In this transitory life, for Everyman and everyone around, the blessed sacraments seven there be: baptism, confirmation, with priesthood good, and the sacrament of God's precious flesh and blood, marriage, the holy extreme unction, and penance; gracious sacraments of high divinity.

Fain would Everyman receive that Holy Body and meekly to His ghostly father he will go. God will him to salvation bring, for priesthood exceedeth all other thing; to us Holy Scripture they do teach; and converteth man from sin, heaven to reach; God hath to them more power given, than to any angel that is in heaven. With five words he may consecrate

God's body in flesh and blood to make, and handleth his Maker between his hands. The priest bindeth and unbindeth all bands, both in earth and in heaven. No remedy we find under God but all only priesthood. God gave priests that dignity, and setteth them in his stead among us to be; thus be they above angels in degree. The story goes that sinful priests giveth the sinners example bad; their children sitteth by other men's fires; and some haunteth women's company with unclean life, as lusts of lechery. These be with sin made blind. Such a story aside, let us priesthood honour, and follow their doctrine for our souls' succour. We be their sheep, and they shepherds be by whom we all be kept in surety.

Now that he hath received the sacrament for his redemption, and then his extreme unction, Everyman gives blessings to all who counselled

him to take it, and thanks God that his companions have tarried so long. They again promise they will not from him go till he hath done this voyage long.

Truth to say, Everyman will not turn again to this land, not for all the world's gold; for into this cave must he creep, and turn to earth, and there to sleep. What, into this grave? Alas! To smother here, to consume, more and less? That's too much for the crowd. Beauty crosses out all this, he takes his tap in his lap and is gone. He is deaf; he looks not behind him. Strength will Everyman also forsake and deny; this game liketh him not at all. Discretion will after Strength be gone, he will leave Everyman alone; he will go from him, for when Strength goeth before he follows after evermore. Five Wits his leave now of Everyman he takes; he will follow the other, for here he him forsakes. Knowledge, for now, will not from hence depart till he sees where Everyman shall become. However, when he to Death shall go, he will forsake him, as well. It is Good-Deeds who will stand by Everyman, the two of them will descend into the grave together, because Everyman must be gone to make his reckoning and his debts pay, for he seeth his time is nigh spent away.

Take example, all ye that this do hear or see, how they that Everyman loved best do forsake him, except his Good-Deeds that bideth truly. All earthly things is but vanity: Beauty, Strength, and Discretion, do man forsake, foolish friends and kinsmen, that fair spake – all fleeth save Good-Deeds. Into God's hands Everyman's soul he commends. Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost. "As thou me boughtest, so me defend, and save me from the fiend's boast, that I may appear with that blessed host that shall be saved at the day of doom. *In manus tuas* – of might's most for ever – *commendo spiritum meum*."

It is now for the doctor to draw the conclusion: "Beauty, Five Wits, Strength, and Discretion, they all at last do Everyman forsake, save his Good-Deeds, there doth he take. But beware, and they be small before God, he hath no help at all. None excuse may be there for Everyman. Alas, how shall he do then? For, after death, amends may no man make, for then mercy and pity doth

him forsake. If his reckoning be not clear when he doth come, God will say, *Ite, maledicti, in ignem aeternum*. And he that hath his account whole and sound, high in heaven he shall be crowned; unto which place God bring us all thither, that we may live body and soul together." (Everyman 1485) A stange admission, by all means: that we live in communities and rely on communities (Davies 2005); but, when the hour of death comes, we die on our own. At the "moment of truth" I am all by myself.

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